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Communicating the sustainability issues in higher education institutions World Wide Webs

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Abstract

Higher Education Institutions play a key role in building more sustainable societies and creating new paradigms. As educational institutions, they are responsible for promoting sustainability issues through research and teaching, disseminating new knowledge and building capabilities. However the ill-defined nature of sustainability manifests have focused on the reasoning for why sustainable development needs broad adoption, but not on the clear sustainability evidences analysis. Firstly this paper shortly discusses the importance of Universities roles in meeting sustainability challenges. Secondly this paper explores the research results based on Lithuanian higher education institutions World Wide Web communication channel to demonstrate how close or far they are to the sustainable development approach.

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1. Introduction

Over past few decades sustainable development has become a common interest for the academic community. Nobody argues that sustainability is an important issue. Education for sustainable development started with an ambitious task in a period of 2005 – 2014 years to achieve sustainable development in the way that we think and act (UNESCO, 2005). Since 2005, UNESCO as a leading agency for the UN Decade of Education has been working on facilitating networks, linkages for exchanging practices among education for sustainable development stakeholders;

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on fostering quality of teaching, learning; on building research and capacity in education for sustainable development; on supporting countries in realizing the Millennium Development Goals through education for sustainable development efforts; on offering education for sustainable development as an umbrella concept for emerging education.

2012 Report on the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development presented that higher education is taking right place in collaborative, trans-disciplinary, cross boundary contexts. However, the biggest growing field in education for sustainable development is climate change problems analysis and drawing higher education institutions responsibilities in that way. Only some universities understand sustainability issues in a broader way. Sustainability issues are used to organize and profile universities activities. Consequently, solving these problems "Rio +20" conference participants were focused on the challenges for the green economy and institutional framework. Moreover, university is a microcosm of the larger community, and the manner in which it carries out its daily activities is the important evidence for the environmental responsibility demonstration. "By practicing what it preaches, the university can both engage students in understanding the institutional metabolism of materials and activities, and have them actively participate to minimize pollution and waste" (Talloires Declaration, 1990). Domarkas, et al (2012) emphasized that sustainable development issues could be achieved through the institutional environment. While universities and their decisions affect economic, social and environmental dimensions, in turn it affects public authorities. However, the scientific literature (Barth, et al., 2007; Dawe, Jucker, & Martin, 2005) deals with sustainability issues only with a focusing on the economic, social and environmental triad despite focusing to the universities environmental decisions based on sustainable development issues.

Usually universities present their social and environmental performance through sustainability report which is placed in the universities websites. Consequently universities sustainability report is not intended to be an integrated report that covers a full range of socio-economic data. Expansion of networks and websites which are based on information technology development ensure attractive opportunity to communicate and disseminate all universities sustainable development issues.

This paper is a continuation of the first paper "Dissemination of Sustainable Development on Universities Websites" by Katiliūtė and Daunorienė presented on the 6th World conference on Education Science in 2014. The main aim of this paper is to analyze the level of particularity of sustainable development issues presented on universities websites. Firstly the paper offers a description of the method used to carry out this research. Secondly this study presents the research results based on 14 Lithuanian universities websites analysis in order to determine which issues of sustainable development are presented on it. Finally, to demonstrate the value of the research, the paper concludes with a discussion on opportunities to universities as agents for initiating, managing and presenting sustainability results.

2. Method

A content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980) methodology was used to analyze the sustainable development information issues of 14 Lithuanian universities websites. Research background was created (see details in ongoing Katiliūtė and Daunorienė paper "Dissemination of Sustainable Development on Universities Websites" article) by the analysis of the Global Reporting Initiative (2013), the ISO 26000 (2011) and Capriotti & Moreno (2007) developed method. The identified characteristics corresponding to sustainable development issues are shown in Table 1. Content analysis of the identified universities sustainable development issues took place, disclosing qualitative aspects, with the aim to portray a summary of the existing sustainability evidences and identify improvement opportunities in it.

Table 1. Issues of universities sustainable development

Issues	Definition
University profile	Explanation of the university's views, values, and strategy. Presentation of university structure and legal form, financial situation, organizations and countries with which university collaborates. Explanation of achieved results.
Products and services	Explanation university's services and products from a university's perspective.
University governance	Declarations and explanations of the university's transparency, compromises in the governance of the university. Explanation of practicing accountability and transparency at all levels. Explanation of the structure of power, remunerations, responsibilities, government departments.
University ethics	Declarations and explanations of university's ethical compromises in relation with its employees and groups of public.
Employment and human resources	Declarations and explanations of its systems of contract, promotion, evaluation, and dismissal. Declarations and explanations on policies and procedures concerning aspects of human rights (children labour, discrimination, security practices, indigenous rights, etc.). Explanation of university's employee training percentage of trained employees.
Economic action	Declarations and actions related to the economic impact of the university's in its local, regional, national, and international environment.
Social action	Declarations and actions related to the university's involvement in social issues.
Environmental action	Declarations and actions related with university's involvement in environmental issues (environment of used sustainable resources; prevention of pollution; protection of environment and biodiversity; restoration of natural habitats, etc.).
Relationship with publics	Declarations and actions related with university's community (community involvement; education and culture; employment creation and skills development; technology development and access; wealth and income creation; social investment, etc.).
External criteria	Declarations, explanations, and linking with the national and international criteria on aspects of sustainable development.

With regard to the evaluation of sustainable development information on universities websites 5 points evaluation scale was applied. 4 points were given to evidences on the dominated advantages; 3 – to the evidences on dominated advantages rather than disadvantages; 2 – to the evidences on dominated disadvantages rather than advantages; 1 – to the evidences on dominated disadvantages; 0 – points were given if the evidences were absent. Information was codified in Excel codification forms. During evaluation phrase given points to sustainable development issues were commented by describing founded evidences. The research was carried out from 1 January till 1 March 2014.

3. Results

Research findings showed that universities webpages to disseminate sustainable development issues are used by all analyzed Lithuanian universities. 40 % of analyzed Lithuanian universities webpages have a specific section of sustainable development issues. Although, the section with the title “sustainable development” has not been mentioned directly on websites. Only few universities identified sustainability as green university or social responsible university. Analyzed universities sustainable development issues are presented in figure 1. The most relevant sustainability issues are those linked to present general characteristics of universities' profile and university governance. Generally, these issues present academic history, mission and vision statements, values, and financial statements, and universities governance structure.

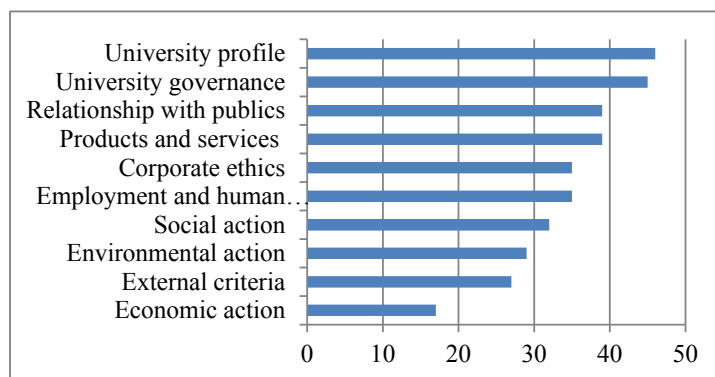


Figure 1. Universities sustainable development issues

As a result of universities product, services and relationship with public sustainable development issues, universities present many contacts, much information that is necessary, for example, to do the payment; many organizations that are able to help in any question. In some cases universities provide open discussion platform, where customer or public representative can directly ask questions and quickly get answers. Regarding the corporate ethics, employment and human resources area of concern, the majority of universities present the ethic code, academic information, general documents, and space for Intranet. Concerning social and environmental action issues of sustainability, universities present information about local and regional efforts, for example. Organizing and participating in various events, collaborating with different organizations, etc. Due to economic and external sustainability issues content, universities generally provides some information and remarks based on economic development issues, membership in international organizations.

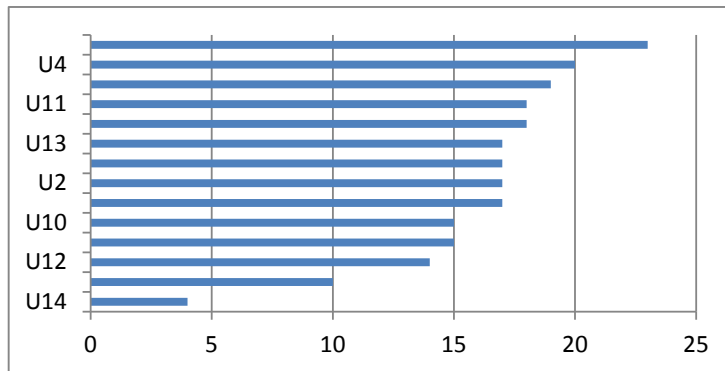


Figure 2. Universities sustainability total evaluation

The second figure reveals that the majority of universities sustainable development issues received 15 to 20 points out of 40 points. Only one university reached 23 points line. A remarkable fact is that universities do not disseminate sustainable development issues explicitly. Admittedly, it could be based on multidimensional and complicated nature of sustainable development issues (Karatzoglou, 2012).

4. Discussion/Conclusions

The main contribution of this paper was a comprehensive analysis of universities websites on the dissemination of universities sustainable development issues. Potential role of universities is to accelerate society's transition forward sustainability. Despite the fact that universities have a powerful tool to disseminate sustainable development issues in order to inform community about achieved results and faced challenges, universities usually neglect it. The presence of sustainable development issues (university profile, products and services, university governance, university ethics, employment and human resources, economic action, social action, environmental action, relationship with publics) on universities websites provides low quantity of information. In one way it could be based on the absence of knowledge how to use internet platform for the better information dissemination, on the other way it could be translated as a lack of universities sustainable development issues importance recognition.

Although universities web pages are user friendly, finding information about sustainability issues concerns a lot of time. This conclusion shows that the information on sustainable development issues is placed with lowest hierarchical level of the universities webpages. As well as existing situation of universities webpages shows top-down information flow and a distressed interactivity situation, particularly in building the dialogic relationships.

Moreover the questions raised in the introduction of this article could not be answered without any additional researches. For the future research, the authors suggest to analyze cross disciplinary, inter departmental, multidisciplinary exchanges. To raise the discussions of universities sustainable development issues the authors of this paper suggest to carry out the comparative analysis of sustainable development issues evaluation points and Lithuanian universities rating points.

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